Venezuela begins deployment to 'counter US presence'

CARACAS: Venezuela announced on Tuesday a major, nationwide military deployment to "counter the US naval presence" off its coast.

Washington is carrying out a military campaign in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific, deploying naval and air forces it says are aimed at curbing drug trafficking.

But the operation has sparked fears in Caracas that the ouster of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro is the ultimate US goal.

Washington's forces have carried out strikes on 20 vessels in international waters since early September, killing 76 people, according to US figures.

But the United States has yet to release evidence that the vessels were used to smuggle drugs or posed a threat to the country.

The Venezuelan defence ministry issued a statement announcing a "massive deployment" of land, sea, air, river and missile forces as well as civilian militia.

The state TV channel broadcast footage of military leaders giving speeches in several states.

These high-profile government announcements are common in Venezuela these days, but they do not necessarily lead to visible military deployments on the ground.

Last week US President Donald Trump played down the prospect of going to war with Venezuela, but he said Maduro's days were numbered.

Largest aircraft carrier

Washington sent the largest aircraft carrier in the world to the Latin America region on Tuesday, escalating a military buildup that Venezuela has warned could trigger a full-blown conflict.

In a statement, the US Naval Forces Southern Command said the *USS Gerald Ford*, whose deployment was ordered nearly three weeks ago to help counter drug trafficking, had entered the command's area of responsibility, which encompasses Latin America and the Caribbean.—AFP

ALREWAS (Britain): Catherine, Princess of Wales, lays a wreath during an Armistice Day service at The National Memorial Arboretum. On Nov 11, the anniversary of the end of World War I in 1918, services across Commonwealth countries remembered soldiers who have fallen in the line of duty since then.—AFP

US president says 'we've had a lot of problems' with France

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump took a sudden swipe at France on Monday during an interview with US broadcaster *Fox News*, saying "we've had a lot of problems with the French."

Fox News presenter Laura Ingraham questioned the US president on the enrolment of Chinese students at US universities, saying, "they're not the French, they're the Chinese. They spy on us."

Trump abruptly cut in to respond, saying: "Do you think the French are better, really? I will tell you, I'm not so sure." Trump, who has been locked in a trade war with Beijing, has had a well-catalogued hands-on relationship with his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron, full of muscular handshakes, mutual backslapping, and knee-touching for the cameras.

Macron even rang the US leader directly in September to inform him that he was being blocked on the street by the presidential convoy in New York as he rushed to a meeting from the UN headquarters.

But the pair's bromance has occasionally been tetchy, with Trump notably opposed to Macron's recognition of a Palestinian state and climate policy.

The US leader has also pushed Europe to step up funding of its own defence through NATO, with Macron part of the continent's multi-pronged charm offensive to keep Trump onside with military support of Ukraine against Russia.—AFP

Syria joins alliance against IS after Sharaa-Trump talks

WASHINGTON: Syria has agreed to join the global coalition against the militant Islamic State (IS) group, a US official said on Monday, hours after President Donald Trump welcomed his Syrian counterpart Ahmed al Sharaa for historic White House talks.

Sharaa, whose forces ousted long-time ruler Bashar al Assad late last year, was the first Syrian leader to visit the White House since the Middle Eastern country's independence in 1946.

But the 43-year-old's landmark visit to the Oval Office came just days after Washington removed him from its terrorism list. Sharaa's group, Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), was formerly affiliated with Al Qaeda.

"During the visit, Syria announced that it is joining the global coalition to defeat IS," becoming the 90th member of the alliance and "partnering with the United States to eliminate IS remnants and halt foreign fighter flows," a senior administration official said.

According to the official, Syria will also be allowed to resume diplomatic relations with Washington "to further counterterrorism, security, and economic coordination." Trump said he wanted Syria to become "very successful" after more than a decade of civil war and added that he believed Sharaa "can do it, I really do".

"He's a very strong leader. He comes from a very tough place, and he's a tough guy," Trump told reporters after the meeting, which was closed to press.

"People said he's had a rough past, we've all had rough pasts... And I think, frankly, if you didn't have a rough past, you wouldn't have a chance."

Trump said Syria was a "big part" of his plan for a wider Middle East peace plan, which the US president is hoping will prop up the fragile ceasefire in Gaza.

"Having a stable and successful Syria is very important to all countries in the region," Trump wrote on his *Truth Social* platform after the meeting.

Despite this, Trump would not confirm reports that Syria would sign any non-aggression pact with long-term foe Israel.

Afterwards Sharaa was interviewed by broadcaster *Fox News*, saying Syria's ongoing dispute with Israel over the Golan Heights territory would make entering peace talks difficult now. But he suggested talks facilitated by Trump and Washington could help start negotiations.

Sharaa once had a $10 million US bounty on his head.

In dramatic scenes as he left his meeting with Trump, he climbed out of his motorcade to greet crowds of supporters outside the White House, surrounded on all sides by bodyguards.

Astonishing transformation

Syria's presidency said on *X* that Sharaa and Trump discussed the bilateral relationship, "the ways to strengthen and develop it, as well as a number of regional and international issues of common interest". It published photos of Trump standing and shaking hands with a smiling Sharaa beside the Resolute Desk in the Oval Office.

Other pictures showed the Syrian leader sitting opposite Trump with top US officials, including Vice President J. D. Vance, Pentagon chief Pete Hegseth and top US military officer Dan Caine.—AFP

Man held for plotting killings of German politicians

BERLIN: German police have arrested a man who allegedly made online calls on the darknet to kill politicians, including former chancellors Angela Merkel and Olaf Scholz, judicial sources said on Tuesday.

The suspect, a German-Polish man only partially named as Martin S., was detained late on Monday in the western city of Dortmund, prosecutors said in a statement.

A source close to the investigation said the man had acted alone, was linked to a right-wing conspiracy theorist movement, and that Merkel and Scholz were among those on his hit list.

The man had allegedly issued anonymous calls since June for attacks on public figures and government officials, the Public Prosecutor's Office said.

He also published instructions for building explosive devices and requested donations in cryptocurrencies, to be used as "bounties" for the killings.

Prosecutors said he had posted "death sentences pronounced by himself" as well as the "sensitive personal data of potential victims".—AFP

Indian forces kill six Maoists in Bijapur

RAIPUR: Indian security forces have shot dead six Maoist rebels, police said on Tuesday, weeks after the guerrillas announced a halt to their decades-long insurgency.

New Delhi has launched an all-out offensive and vowed to wipe out the Maoist rebellion by March, with the latest gun battle taking place in Bijapur district of Chhattisgarh state.

"We have so far recovered bodies of six Maoists from the jungle after an encounter with the security forces," senior police official Sundarraj Pattilingam said on the phone.

"Police carried out a joint operation and in the exchange of fire six of the Maoists were killed and a huge amount of arms and explosives have been recovered, including sophisticated weapons, "he said.

The police official said "senior commanders" were killed, without providing further details.

The violence comes nearly two months after the Maoists said they were suspending their armed struggle and offered talks with the government.

"Those who want to surrender are welcome, and those who continue to wield the gun will meet the wrath of our forces," Home Minister Amit Shah said last month.

More than 12,000 rebels, soldiers, and civilians have died in the conflict since a handful of villagers rose against their feudal lords in 1967.

The rebellion controlled nearly a third of the country with an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 fighters at its peak in the mid-2000s, but it has been dramatically weakened in recent years.—AFP

BBC's outgoing boss rallies staff amid leadership crisis, Trump threat

LONDON: The outgoing boss of *BBC* sought to rally his journalists on Tuesday, saying that although they had made mistakes they needed to fight for their work as the broadcaster confronts legal action by US President Donald Trump.

The British Broadcasting Corporation has been plunged into its biggest crisis in decades after its two most senior staffers, Director General Tim Davie and head of news Deborah Turness, quit following criticism over standards and accusations of bias at the corporation, including in connection with the way it edited a speech by Trump.

The president's lawyers have said the *BBC* must retract by Friday the documentary in which the edited speech was aired, or face a lawsuit for "no less" than $1 billion.

Davie told staff that he was fiercely proud of the publicly funded organisation, while acknowledging that "we have made some mistakes that have cost us".

"We are a unique and precious organisation, and I see the free press under pressure, I see the weaponisation," he said at an all-staff meeting.

Questions over public trust

Some political figures and sections of the British press have directed allegations of bias at the *BBC*, including claims that it favours the governing Labour Party, and have used the criticism to challenge its licence fee funding model.

Supporters of the broadcaster argue that such attacks are part of a broader campaign against public service media.

A snap YouGov poll conducted on Monday, a day after Davie's resignation, showed one-third of the British public believes the *BBC* has a left-wing bias.

Analysts say the resignations have exposed deep frictions over governance and editorial standards at the broadcaster, raising questions about whether it can maintain public trust.

An internal memo by a former *BBC* adviser accused it of editorial failings on Trump, the Gaza conflict and transgender coverage.

But Davie, who became director general in 2020, tried to calm worries over the broadcaster's future. "The *BBC* is going to be thriving, and I support everyone on the team," he said ahead of the all-staff meeting.

Davie said he had decided to step down because of the job's relentlessness, the need to give his successor time to prepare for the next review of the *BBC*'s funding model, and an editorial breach that required accountability, according to a transcript of his comments at the staff meeting. The outgoing boss said he was proud of the team he had built, adding that "some responsibility had to be taken" for mistakes made.

Critics have said the edit of a speech made by Trump in 2021 on the day his supporters overran the Capitol was part of a wider pattern of failure to uphold impartiality at the *BBC*.

Review looms

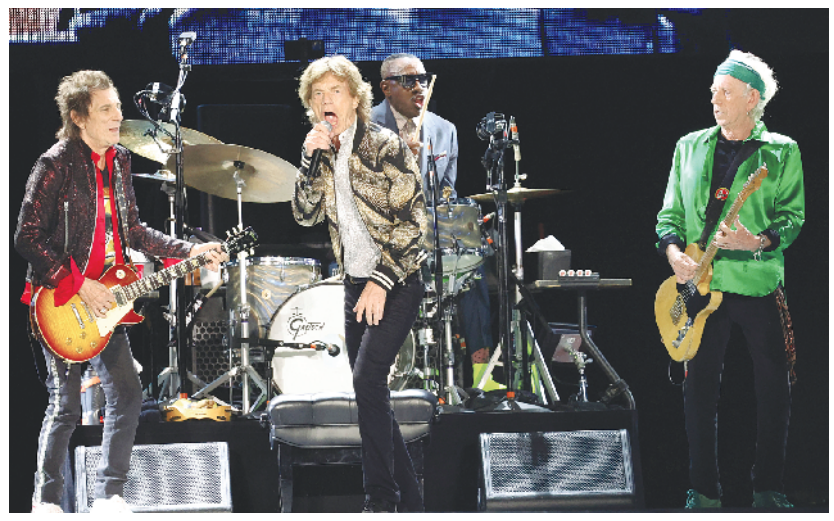
BBC chair Samir Shah apologised for the "error of judgement" in the edit, which was included in a Panorama documentary aired shortly before last year's US presidential election.

The programme, produced by a third party, spliced together remarks delivered nearly an hour apart, omitting Trump's call for peaceful protest and creating the impression he urged violence. —Reuters

NEWSMAKERS

ST PETERSBURG: Diana Loginova, a teenage Russian street musician who has twice served short jail stints for singing anti-Kremlin songs, attends a court hearing as she faces another public order charge.—Reuters

WARSAW: Polish President Karol Nawrocki holds a flag as he participates in a march organised by nationalist groups to mark the 107th anniversary of Poland's independence.—Reuters



A JULY 10, 2024, file picture shows the Rolling Stones performing in Inglewood, California, during their US tour.—Reuters

Rolling Stones guitars, jackets on offer in auction of collector's memorabilia

LONDON: From Brian Jones' guitar to Mick Jagger's jacket, Rolling Stones memorabilia from a private collection heads to auction next month in a sale that could raise around $1.3 million.

Some 185 items, including posters, stage-worn outfits, and tickets, will go under the hammer at Dallas-based Heritage Auctions' "Satisfaction: The Rolling Stones Treasures from the Ali Zayeri Collection" on December 4, with late Rolling Stones' co-founder Jones' Harmony Stratotone electric guitar leading the sale with an estimate of $200,000 - $400,000.

"It was his first electric guitar and it's what he played at their very early gigs, on their demos and even on their first single, a cover of Chuck Berry's 'Come On'," Charles Epting, director of consignments, pop culture and historical at Heritage Auctions, said.

"This is not a high-end instrument. This is what... somebody working class in the early sixties would have been able to afford, so it's a very humble, modest instrument that paved the way for one of the greatest bands of all time." Many of the sale items stem from the group's early years, Epting said. Other items belonging to Jones, who left the group in 1969 and died soon after, include a fringed suede jacket he wore for his final live performance with the band as well as a childhood book. Also for sale are jackets worn by lead singer Jagger and guitarist Keith Richards, as well as drummer Charlie Watts' signed drumsticks.

"The high estimate on the sale is just north of 1.3 million (dollars). Obviously, certain key pieces like (Jones') guitar, the jackets we hope will find new homes and could potentially push that price even higher," Epting said.—Reuters

TEHRAN: A statue depicting Sasanian king Shapur I capturing Roman emperor Valerian, was unveiled at Enghelab Square on Tuesday.—AFP

DAKAR (Senegal): Followers of the Mouride Brotherhood, a Sufi order, participate in a march to commemorate the return from exile in 1902 of their leader Sheikh Amadou Bamba. The Mouride Brotherhood was founded in the late 19th century by Sheikh Bamba, who was exiled by French authorities to Gabon in 1885. He returned to Senegal on Nov 11, 1902.—AFP